

Final Evaluation Report

Project “KH01-56 Battambang Primary Education
Program”

Cambodia, 2020

ACRONYMS

BB	Battambang
BPSP	Battambang Primary School Project
CC	Children's Council
CFS	Child Friendly School
DOE	District Office of Education
DTMT	District Training and Monitoring Team
POE	Provincial Office of Education
SD	School Director
SIP	School Improvement Planning
SSC	School Support Committee

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The Battambang Primary School Project (BPSP) project targeted 3 districts of Battambang province and sought to develop supportive learning environments to empower children to fulfill their educational potential.

Project Objectives were to improve:

1. access to education (especially for girls and vulnerable children) in target locations.
2. the effectiveness of education through the development and practice of Child Friendly School (CFS) approaches, and the management capacity of targeted schools to administer development assistance increases in a way that enhances educational access and quality as well as community outreach.
3. children's reading abilities from a baseline in the early grades (Grades 1-3)
4. school governance
5. the quality of teachers
6. learning facilities
7. parental skills
8. child rights policies.

The BPSP started January 2017 and finished in December 2019 covering 26 schools in three Districts - 4 schools in BB City, 16 schools in Sangkae district and 6 new schools in Rukh Kiri districts of Battambang province.

In July 2017, EDUCO transferred project management to ChildFund Cambodia. In February 2018 the project went through a review process to analyze the design, coverage and approaches which led to the classification of the targeted schools into two development tiers:

1. Tier #1: 13 targeted schools in Sangkae district fully utilizing the E2L model with a budget allocation around 80%, and
2. Tier #2: the remaining 13 target schools in urban Battambang city, Sangkae and Rukh Kiri Districts with a budget of 20% of total budget for implementing basic education activities in line of the BPSP objectives.

The project took a holistic approach that included:

- Technical training for teachers and support staff,
- Innovative learning materials and technology (reading/math toolkits and tablets),
- Practical assessment tools (reading benchmarks, diagnostic testing and interval testing),
- Building the capacity of key stakeholders involved in the school improvement planning process (children, parents, teachers, school administration and local authorities),
- Improvements to the physical infrastructure (renovations, child friendly learning materials and furniture) and grounds of the school (bio-gardens and fisheries),
- Recruitment of Community Teachers to address teacher shortage, and
- Creating opportunities for children and the community to be involved in the school's decision making processes including Children Councils (CC), School Support Committees (SSC) and through School Improvement Planning (SIP) processes, involving participatory planning, implementation, monitoring, reflection and evaluation.

METHODOLOGY APPLIED

The evaluation approach included consultation with the SDs, DTMT, early grade teachers, students, SSCs, project field staff and the ChildFund Cambodia's technical and management team. The respondents were drawn from 18 schools located within the 3 districts and representing Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools. In order to maximize comparability an attempt was made to select schools that were similar in terms of:

- student numbers
- number of ID-Poor families
- degree of geographical isolation
- degree of support from other NGOs

Altogether 58 meetings were held with individuals or small groups during the evaluation process, with 181 respondents (52% female) participating in the evaluation.

Both qualitative (focus group discussions, vignettes, interviews and observation), and quantitative methods (structured questionnaires and project) were utilized during the evaluation.

An analysis of existing documentation was undertaken including existing frameworks, research, evaluations, assessments, and project/program reports from reliable government and non-governmental organizations. This provided a context for the evaluation and assisted in framing the activities to be utilized during the fieldwork.

The fieldwork included:

- a. a structured interview with SDs, teachers, SSC members and DTMT to gather quantitative and qualitative data on 30 factors associated with CFSs (response form translated into Khmer)
- b. a structured group interview with groups of students with recording sheet translated into Khmer (Groups of Grade 1-3 students)
- c. semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers to provide examples of how the project had influenced student learning
- d. observations of school infrastructure

The choice of these strategies was influenced by the need to maximize the validity of the data gathered by incorporating a process of data triangulation to gauge the consistency, or alignment, of evidence accessed or generated.

Every opportunity was taken to encourage a collaborative approach to the data gathering process through the use of group discussions where possible.

MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

- Overall, the BPSP made a significant contribution to its targeted schools, particularly those in the Tier 1 category, and elevated those schools to more closely align with the intent of the “child friendly school” philosophy.
- The importance of the SD and SSC in establishing a learning culture in their schools seemed evident from discussions with these personnel within targeted schools. The importance of the SD in focusing the school on student learning, and the factors contributing the student learning, was evident.
- The introduction of technology to gather data about student learning and the provision of feedback to students and their parents was also a project success. This served as a tool for teachers to monitor their own teaching and as a motivator for students to improve their own performance at school.
- The establishment of school libraries, or the enhancement of existing ones, served to generate interest in reading, and these additions to the targeted schools were viewed with a great deal of pride by the respective school communities. They served to highlight the importance of literacy, promote independent learning and were a means of strengthening home / school partnership through the ability of parents to access and borrow learning materials to support their children at home.

- Similarly, the improvements to school grounds and infrastructure had a positive impact on student safety and wellbeing, as well as enhancing community pride and ownership of the school as a community facility.
- It was evident that teachers interviewed appreciated the training provided in the use of toolkits and life-skills and were utilizing those skills in their classrooms. For some, this training had been their only significant training opportunity within their career so far.
- Student responses were very consistent in terms of their positive attitudes towards school, their appreciation of their teachers, and the value they placed on school attendance. They were appreciative of the school-wide improvements that had taken place over the duration of the project. They saw themselves as members of a safe and supportive learning community that provided opportunities for them to gain key study and life skills.

ANALYSIS OF EVALUATION CRITERIA

Relevance

- The project was relevant to disadvantaged children through the scholarship program and through the focus in literacy development and other basic skills.
- The project supported the achievement of child rights, particularly the rights for protection, although school-based policies on child protection and supporting children with disabilities, for example, were lacking and it was unclear how PEO guidelines were being implemented.
- The right to participation was being encouraged through the existence of CCs and the encouragement of children to work collaboratively with teachers and SSC in the maintenance of the school.

Effectiveness

- In terms of the results-based management system, some of the objectives were unclear and seemed to have multiple purposes. There seemed to be some confusion between the notion of “outputs” and “processes”. Some concepts used in the log frame were not clearly defined, such as “standard benchmarks”. Indicators did not seem to correlate closely with these intended objectives in some situations.
- Student numbers in classrooms visited varied significantly thus requiring considerable flexibility by teachers. Some were using group work and peer support more efficiently than others.
- The introduction of new resources in the form of tablets, toolkits and library material seemed to focus the Tier 1 schools in particular on their core business – enhanced student learning outcomes. The interventions served to heighten students interest in, and enjoyment of, the learning activities that they were engaged in.
- There was evidence that the project may have heightened the professional status of teachers and enhanced their standing within their communities.
- The increased knowledge and skills acquired enhanced the confidence of participating teachers enabling them to broaden their scope of teaching strategies.
- Teachers also began to re-think student assessment strategies. Rather the single bi-annual or annual “tests” or “exams” teachers had begun to incorporate on-going assessment of student learning and the provision of regular feedback on performance.

Efficiency

- In terms of the efficiency of resource use, it seems that the resources to support literacy development were utilized appropriately by schools. Library resources were utilized by students, teachers and the broader community but the library, as a knowledge repository, could have been integrated more into the broader school curriculum.
- In terms of project document management, some project documentation was provided by ChildFund prior to the evaluation but further document that were requested either could not be located or did not exist.

Inclusiveness

- The Project Log Frame indicated that the project was not a gender focused project but rather gender was a cross cutting issue manifested through separate initiatives like separate toilets for boys and girls, teachers treating boys and girls equally and 63% of girls being elected as leaders of CC sub-branches.
- The enrolment of girls in targeted schools seems equitable given that 51% of students in classes observed during the evaluation were female.

Sustainability

- Libraries should be a sustainable resource for schools and communities if they can continually evolve as dynamic learning environments to meet the needs and interests of children and the community generally. This may mean greater levels of community ownership and responsibility for their management rather than the expectation that these resources will be provided by an external body.
- The project served to further develop the knowledge and skills of the DTMT and this team's capacity to continually support the ongoing professional development of teachers and other school personnel.
- The sustainability of the project may well need the ongoing support of the DTMTs and these teams need to expand in terms of their membership and individual capacity to provide the necessary support for the schools within their district. Such external support will be even more important as NGO support diminishes. There was evidence that DTMTs were finding it difficult to maintain the level of support required by schools, so the strengthening of these services is a key component of project sustainability.
- The degree of collegiality among project schools will also be a factor in project sustainability. The opportunity to share successes, resources and challenges among schools could contribute to sense of unity among the schools and provide the benefits of schools working as a "learning community" where good practices developed in individual schools become "common practice" across all schools.
- To promote the ownership of local communities and ensure the sustainability, the project worked with SDs, teachers, Commune Council members, DoE and PoEs to engage them in project implementation. DoE staff showed active performance in the project specifically to support classroom learning environments in some schools, visiting teachers and SDs, attending cluster technical meetings, leading school improvement planning and involvement in school assessment.

Impact

- The project seemed to have an impact on students attitude towards education. Virtually all student respondents indicated that they enjoyed school and really wanted to learn. They appreciated the support provided to them.
- The impact on parents seemed to be mixed with, on the one hand, parents expressing high expectations for their children's schooling achievements, but generally having limited direct contact with the school on the other. There was generally strong support for the work of the SSC in each of the targeted schools and the training provided to them impacted on their capacity to contribute the school planning and management.
- The project may have promoted greater awareness of the impact of interventions on the development of schools as learning communities.
- The project positioned literacy development as a key learning outcome for early grade students. The emphasis on literacy development through the support provided by DTMTs, literacy coaches and librarians, and through the establishment or further development of school libraries, was a clear project success.
- Those interviewed, particularly students, seemed to have developed an enhanced sense of school pride and strong belief about the value of education for their future.
- It raised the importance of primary education in targeted communities and addressed concerns about the likelihood of school drop out in later years.
- Tangible changes included significant improvements to school infrastructure and amenities and the process of collaborative planning and leadership through the strengthening of SSCs.

LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICE

The project found that it was beneficial to include librarians, literacy coaches, student councils and peer tutoring in the training and reflection workshops on analyzing the results of interval tests and RRS as these key people had important roles in supporting children in increasing reading performance as it contributed to ownership and project results.

The project recognized that school mapping and student profile capacity building by technical experts were very important for SDs to understand in order to identify children's needs and to develop school improvement plans to support children in a timely way. Mentoring was a successful approach to support SDs in the proper planning, implementation and monitoring the school grant project. However, during the reporting period school improvement plans had been completed late so some interventions were delayed.

The project may not have explored the interdependency among the various interventions. That is, the project had a number of important interventions for school improvement, but the connection among them may not have been clear enough, and the possible synergies left untapped. A visual model explaining their inter-dependency may have assisted in clarifying these connections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- Greater emphasis is placed on building the capacity of each DTMT in order to broaden their operational scope and extend their knowledge base. It was clear that schools needed ongoing support in terms of teacher professional development and that the DTMT was seen as a valued provider of such support, but were unable to provide the levels of support required for all schools.
- The function of school libraries continues to be extended to integrate closely with classroom activities across the curriculum and to serve as centres for knowledge development, inquiry and for the teaching of specific listening, reading, writing and talking skills – in addition to their current role of encouraging interest in literacy. This could include the role of the librarian as a “teacher/librarian” as well as a resource manager.
- Participating schools continue to encourage women to serve as members of SSCs in order to broaden the knowledge, skill and experience of these committees, promote women's involvement in education, encourage greater parental participation in school activities and to serve as models of gender equity for all students.
- The peer support initiatives taking place be continued and extended to engage capable students as “buddies” or “helpers” of other students who may need to better develop their literacy, numeracy or social skills. Such student engagement could also be encouraged by involving students more in discussions about how their classroom and school could be managed and improved and how they could take greater ownership of the learning process.
- Participating schools continue, and extend, their data gathering processes to monitor progress against project goals and that students continue to play a key part in this process.
- Schools continue to seek ways to engage all parent / caregivers in their children's education by continuing to promoting the parent /teacher meeting approach, adopting the “home / school liaison” approach that some teachers referred to for students at risk, and by continuing to encourage parent / community use of the school library.
- Support provided to schools targeted for the project, or similar projects, be based on the specific individual needs of schools in order to align with their stage of development (in terms of, for example, leadership, management, parent involvement, teacher experience or student achievement).